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## **Avant-garde and politics**

### **Malevich, Stalin, Laibach**

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Tuomas Nevanlinna looks at the Russian avant-garde movement under Stalin and demonstrates how surprisingly alike art and politics behaved in their relentless pursuit of destroying the "old world". Even before Stalin, the avant-garde showed how the artistic desire to modify material might well be combined with a political will to power. Nevanlinna not only uncovers the unholy relations between art and politics but, in the second part of the article, demonstrates ways in which modern art such as the Sos Art of the 1980s and music of the notorious band Laibach address the dangers of over-identification with power and politics. And yet, the destiny of art and politics, he concludes, will always be decided together.

Russian avant-garde is generally discussed in the liberal western press in the following tone: In the zeal of its early years and under the chaotic and unstable conditions of the time, the revolutionary government allowed all flowers to bloom. Later, when order had been re-established, this "pluralism" was smothered. Finally, Stalin sealed the fate of the free artist: socialist realism – which, aesthetically, represented a propagandist and reactionary return to Slavic and traditional themes – was declared official art.

This picture of the relationship between the avant-garde and Stalin is misleading. According to Russian-German cultural philosopher Boris Groys, Stalin in fact carried out what had been the dream of the avant-garde right from the start. The marginalisation or decline of the avant-garde movement



was not caused by the efforts of Soviet power to repress all “free criticism” – the reason was rather that Stalin recognised the avant-gardists as his rivals. It was Stalin who carried out the avant-garde dream of organising social life in accordance with an overall artistic plan (though not, of course, exactly in the way the avant-gardists had had in mind), and it was actually only after Stalin’s death that the reactionary, neo-nationalist and neo-traditionalist culture that socialist realism is always blamed for evolved in the Soviet Union.

The avant-gardists gave up (or pretended to give up) the mimetic, “copying” or reproducing relationship with reality that had until then dominated the entire history of art. In this thinking, the world was seen as a limited and as such perfect act of God’s creation, and the artist’s task was to display it in an aesthetic form as closely imitated as possible. The classical artist was, of course, the more successful the “closer to God” he or she managed to get in doing this.

After this, the technological age murdered God. The artistic practice of the entire Russian avant-garde is a reaction to this event. In other words, it was by no means inspired by a blind belief or infatuation with technological progress, although this is often thought to have been so. Nor did the avant-garde wish to attack what was “holy” or considered holy. Rather, it was right from the start a defensive movement by nature: its goal was to compensate for the destructive effect of technology that had shattered the world as a unity guaranteed by God’s creative work.

The key figure of the early Russian avant-garde was undoubtedly Kasimir Malevich. According to him, all “creative power” in both nature and art is based on a key with which unending progress can be overcome. Progress is senseless and leads to *no-thing*. The destruction and fragmentation it causes must be taken to the extreme, until something is found beyond space, time and history that is an irreducible existence that man can attach to. This is what the “Black Square” represented. It was aimed as the object of the pure intuitive form of the transcendental subject – an absolute *no-thing*, pure potentiality. This makes it possible to find the “suprematist primary elements” that the “unconscious of non-objective forms” consists of and which guide people in their relationships with the world. Earlier, these elements had guided the birth of harmonious entities in both nature and classical art unconsciously, but now, after the spontaneous order had broken down, they had to be approached with a conscious mind. [1]



According to Malevich, such a “discovery” can only be made by an artist. Or the state. He was not afraid of the state as a rival, however, as the state still trusted in technological progress and had proved a “lower” power than the artist in that respect.

Malevich’ contemporary, the poet Velimir Hlebnikov, developed a purely phonetic language that would affect the listener or reader in a secret, magical way. Even this project was based on the assumption of a language of the “unconscious”. Its utopia was to organise the world on a completely new “audio basis”.

Malevich and Hlebnikov shared the idea of the supremacy of the unconscious and both also thought that it would be possible to manipulate this unconscious technologically and aesthetically in order to create a new world and a new human being. The goal was to regain a magic power of image and word in modern, as it were once-already-destroyed conditions. Without being forced or separately explained, this magic power is able to create the kind of spontaneous “divine terror” whose power Plato recognised and which he for that reason doomed to exile from his Republic. Today’s autonomous art-work struggling between the reflective taste of the audience and the freedom of the artist is no longer able to awaken that power.

It is true, however, that in Stalin’s time the relationship between truth and art became, perhaps for the last time, literally a question of life and death, when an inappropriate work or wrong interpretation might lead to death...

The “degree zero” Malevich was looking for that was to sweep all historical representations off the world’s table found its tragicomic phenomenological counterpart in post-Revolution everyday life: the country was in ruins and there was as good as nothing left of normal life or hereditary relations. That explains why Malevich’s mystic visions turned perversely into a commentary on the everyday Russian life of the time.

After the Revolution, the majority of the avant-gardists had, in fact, taken an unreserved stand for the new Bolshevik government. This was not opportunism but a direct consequence of the artistic programme of the avant-garde.

The projects of traditional artists were always “limited”, because they could assume an entire, in-itself-perfect world behind them. Their divine fragments reached for a similar perfection in their own way. The world of the avant-



gardists, by contrast, had already turned into a sombre chaos and had to be created all over again. This project was necessarily total, which almost irrevocably also led to the immediate politicisation of art – at least to the extent that the “world” the artist was to build was interpreted as humankind or nation. Finally, it is clear that a total poetic project of this kind cannot be subjected to any outwardly set limitations, anything that “already is”, or any historically known forms of representation and understanding.

From this point of view, it also becomes understandable that the avant-garde did not operate through “texts”: it processed the context, place or connection of art directly. In the Old World, the problem was how to fill the Holy Place reserved for art (such as a cult temple or altar, for example) with a work that would be worthy of that place, “sufficiently” beautiful for it. On the other hand, the place itself emanated the “charisma” or aura experienced as an aspect of the object. The problem of modern art, by contrast, is always the opposite: we can no longer trust that the Holy Place exists.

In the modern situation, one of the tasks assumed by art for itself is necessarily the maintenance of that Place itself. It must be guaranteed, as it were, that the place itself “happens”. The problem is no longer *horror vacui* – the fact that the void must be filled – but the creation and guarantee of the void, the place of the correct location of art. This is what avant-garde also reached for: it aimed to save the abyss that separates the Place and the work located in it from each other.

What becomes represented in Kasimir Malevich’s black square is, in fact, simply this reduced difference between the empty Place (the white background or surface) and the element located in it (the “heavy” material stain of the square).

As they destroyed the old world, the Bolsheviks in a sense cleared the table “for” the avant-gardists at the same time. At least, this was the artists’ own interpretation of the events. They also encouraged the government to destroy the competing art opposition that time had passed by. (In other words, avant-garde did definitely not mean a “pluralism of creative individuals”...)

The avant-gardists already began to drift on a sidetrack during the time of the NEP, when the Bolshevik power had already begun to stabilise itself to a



certain extent. At the same time, a new class of young “yes-men” had emerged. It was also at this time that a fresh group of even more radical avant-gardists and constructivists began to gather together round the LEF magazine. Their “productionism” already actually aimed at organising production and everyday life by means of art. The artist had to give up dabbling with autonomous works, which was reactionary, and develop into a master minder of both colours and lights and production and mass events. The entire public life was to be organised under the leadership of the artist, so that the world could be moulded in a new artificial/artistic form – cf., *techne* in its entire sphere of meaning. The aim was to create a self-sufficient and self-reflective system that would not have to lean on anything external to it.

The Leftists despised the yes-man opposition, which liked to present itself as both politically and aesthetically “realistic”. Such art aimed at combining the set of methods of classical, mimetic art and its utilitarian use as propaganda. It was political in terms of content at the most, as tendentious art taking a stand. From the point of view of the avant-gardists, this was nothing but reactionary, compromising art, based on an unresolved conflict between old aesthetic and autonomous requirements and the utilitarian impulses demanded by the time. The avant-gardists believed to have solved this problem: on the one hand, constructionism was completely autonomous, because it was not subjected to any worldly principle external to it, but at the same time, it was completely poetic or productionist, as it had no mimetic task whatsoever.

At the level of empirical reality, the conflict could not be solved so easily. There were two alternatives: either to drift on a double sidetrack both in relation to the “yes-man opposition” and power or to present oneself more and more clearly as a stooge for the Party. As the Leftists, of course, had no real power to decide in political matters, they in actual fact accepted to focus on agitation and propaganda. When making their press photos, posters and advertisements, they let themselves be lulled into thinking that they were still dealing with “life” – forgetting that this material was as good as completely pre-manipulated by the Bolshevik government. Even contemporary criticism pointed this out: what were the avant-gardists other than decorators and designers busying themselves pleasing the Party leaders? In what way did an avant-gardist who had gone into the service of the Party actually differ from the copy editors and art designers who served the capitalists in the West? This was not a question of the disappearance of



autonomous art – which was exactly what the avant-gardists advocated – but of the discontinuation of their own project.

Conclusion: the real artists of the time where the political Bolshevist leaders, and Stalin was the jewel in their crown.

In 1932, the Central Committee of the Soviet Union decided to dissolve all independent artist associations. A new body controlled by the Party was founded. The age of Stalinist “total control” began, which also meant that even the last vestiges of the art market disappeared. It was in this total work of art called “socialism in one country” that the dream of the avant-gardists of moulding new life began to come true. Their goal had been to make politics “aesthetic” or artistic; now Stalin made aesthetics political.

In other words, the avant-gardists were not so much ideological opponents to Stalin than rivals in carrying out the same basic idea. From Stalin’s point of view the problem was that the avant-gardists tried to be “wiser than the Party”. The same logic could be seen in the liquidations of the 30s in a very systematic way: the most eager supporters of the Party line were the ones being eliminated.

For a long time already, Stalin had sought his way to a neutral position in the disagreements between artists and artistic movements. All he had to do now was to watch from the side as the other artistic groups slowly destroyed the avant-garde movement. (Mayakovski’s suicide may be considered to be the symbolic end point of this process.) Finally, the artists themselves begged the Father to take the art world under his leadership!

Ever since, the Party leaders made it a rule to comment on the art world in their speeches – in addition to economy, politics and the present state of the army. In these commentaries, they protected the only real work of art: socialism. And this work could not be criticised from the outside: that would immediately have been a sign of performative “lack of knowledge”. Only the Party could be in possession of the author’s knowledge of this work.

Stalin’s time acted out the main requirement of avant-garde that art must change from describing life to modifying it, subjected to a total aesthetico-political plan.

To the avant-garde, autonomous art dominated by western pluralism of taste and art markets represented something analogous to parliamentary democracy: instead of just counting people’s tastes and “votes” together on art markets or in elections, the voice of the masses must be made into a



choir under whose leadership a new reality can be constructed. The task of art is not to produce new stories, images or tunes, but to serve as a means of production in creating a new human being. The aesthetics and practice of Stalin's time, in fact, lay in the education and modification of the masses. Finally, writers became indeed "engineers of the human soul".

I might mention as an ironic detail that Stalin also carried out Hlebnikov's programme of phonetic poetry, not only in the currency, which hardly had any value left, but above all in propaganda which no longer had any meaning. It no longer had any semantic content; it became part of the cultural unconscious, exactly as the poet had dreamt...

The official artistic trend of Stalin's time, socialist realism, is generally understood as the exact opposite of "formalist" avant-garde. However, the total programme of which it was a part was the direct heir of constructivism. The differences, too, are obvious, but they must be deducted from the specific logic of avant-garde and not, for example, from the personal tastes of the leader or the educational level of the masses. The key differences between avant-garde and socialist realism become apparent, according to Groys, in relation to the following three questions:

1. How to relate to the classical tradition? 2. What is the position of mimesis in art? 3. In what relationship is the artist demiurgic to the world and the world to him?

Differently from the "yes-man opposition" that defended the classical set of methods and the autonomy of art, both avant-garde and socialist realism accepted the "utilitarianisation" of art. In spite of that, avant-garde could not accept socialist realism. The relationship of its official representatives with the classical heritage was the same as Lenin's: what must be adopted from bourgeois artistic heritage is its greatest and most lasting element.

From the point of view of avant-garde, the problem of Stalin's poetics was not, therefore, its "totalitarianism" or anti-pluralism, quite the opposite, the problem was that Stalin drew too hard a bargain: he was too conciliatory and too conservative in relation to tradition. When the artists of the *prolet-cult* had announced that Raphael's works ought to be burned, for the Bolshevik leaders such a deed would have meant not only the destruction of national property but also a fatal neglecting of the "educational" function of classical art. Consequently, avant-garde appeared as "barbaric" in the eyes of the Party, and vice versa.



The socialist realists (whose work has only begun to be exhibited in western museums during the last few years) regarded themselves as saviours of the classical heritage. We have a chance to see the works of the Russian avant-gardists, by contrast, clearly more often in our museums. Today's art tourist easily forgets, however, that from the point of view of the avant-gardists, neither the museums nor these works were supposed to survive in the first place!

The artistic tradition of the avant-gardists is known through and through; it is alive and full of meaning – and that is exactly why it had to be destroyed to achieve a new beginning, degree zero, reduction. Avant-garde valued the artistic heritage so high that it would rather destroy it in its own name than debase it by making it the slave of selected and opportunistic goals. The relationship with the past was a question of either-or, and absolutely not dialectic.

The party leaders of Stalin's time, for their part, rose to power in a situation where everything had already been destroyed and no living relationship with tradition existed any more. From the point of view of socialist realism, (art) history had already ended and the nation was living in a time of an eschatologist utopia. Tradition appeared to socialist realism, as it does to the modern consumer, as a supermarket where one could go pick and choose the elements best suitable for one's specific needs. From the point of view of Stalinism, everything was new (even the classics, in a way) and there was no longer any need for formal innovations. Only the either progressive or reactionary "content" mattered.

To the Nazi philosopher Alfred Rosenberg, the mythical ability represented the ability of dreams to project a mental image one could identify with. The ongoing mythical awakening of Germany was related to the fact that the nation wanted to dream its "original dream". This did not refer to the mythological forms or manifestations of dreams, such as Wotan or Valhalla, but to the fact that Germany had not dreamt its own dream yet: she had never had a mythical identity, a real, powerful and able German identity, her own type.

Type (*typos*) was also one of the favourite words of socialist realism. The type is simultaneously a model and its realisation. (Understood in this way, the concept of type itself may be considered the metatype of European aesthetics.)



To socialist realism, “typical” did not mean average. Typical was the essence of the age. The term “realism” is therefore justified even in this sense, as the opposite of nominalism. Instead of the external, observable reality, the innermost core of the artist was understood as the object of mimesis, insofar as and to the extent that the artist was prepared to identify with Stalin and the will of the Party. This identification must be built into a model of the reality that the will modifies. In Stalinist art, “typical” was Stalin’s dream world that had become observable. This could be straight from the mouth of Rosenberg...

Different from avant-garde, socialist realism also leaned on the mimetic and “cognitive” function of art. Even in this sense, “realism” can be regarded as justified. Mimesis was primarily understood on the basis of the Leninist theory of reflection. But although the goal of mimesis was to reflect reality, reality itself was understood as always-already modified by the Party. This leads us to the third – Hegelian – moment of realism: the “beautiful” paintings favoured by socialist realism were “real” to the extent that they represented, in a typical way, the current stage of the ideal become real.

The idea of avant-garde as a mighty power or demonic energy that will destroy the old world did not stem from any worldly passion but from the death (murder) of God as an absolute transcendental event. This striving for good is also visible in western avant-garde, particularly in surrealism – Breton’s cult of banal and forgotten objects can be seen as a post-murder effort to sanctify this world through and through. If and when the restoration of old gods was no longer possible, this “sanctification” could only happen by means of extreme secularisation: only after thoroughly completed secularisation can everything become holy.

Against this background of avant-garde we can again better understand the “return of beauty” in socialist realism. It was not realism in the traditional sense, but hagiography or demonology. Art did not represent heroes; rather, heroes were incarnated in it.

We must not let the technical and constructionist nature of avant-garde nor the scientism typical of Stalinism lead us astray. Both were concerned with destroying the old world and opening a way to the sphere of the holy with which petrified tradition had lost contact. Avant-garde believed that its complicity in the murder of God will give the artist demiurgic and magical skills that can create something new. It was convinced that behind the destruction of this world, laws will arise that will ultimately guide both



cosmic and social forces. The artist had to become an “engineer” of these forces and modify and manipulate the world in accordance with them. This was to lead to a level of experience that had nothing to do with banal utilitarianism or idealised technology. This is often forgotten when avant-gardist works are studied in their later, museum-based context. On the other hand, we must understand that even the banality of technology may hide the metaphysical effort that guides it. The “theology” of technology is to replace this world with the trouble-free, fleshless verb, a kind of ideal dictionary or realised metaphysical machine whose calculations can no longer fail. In Heideggerian terms: the technological age and avant-garde are both expressions of the “last” opening of Platonic metaphysics as technology. As is well known, *techne* is at the root of both art and technology, and even modification is always related to (complementary or completing) mimesis. [2] Whatever the avant-gardists themselves may say of their relationship with mimesis...

Avant-garde aimed to build the world into a self-piloting machine steered by a cosmic unconscious, by means of which it would become a living force in the world. The romanticism of Stalin’s time, by contrast, modified the external and mechanical utopia of avant-garde into a kind of love cult led by an “internal” identification and assimilation. Accepting to serve that machine would guarantee the overcoming of death and allow the servant to enter into a mystic union with Stalin, give up his/her own will and fulfil the wish of her/his Leader-Creator. It was a kind of masochistic love, where one presents oneself as an instrument of the Great Other.

The “Byzantine” and theological features of socialist realism are often explained by Stalin’s seminary background and the orthodox tradition of the people of Russia. However, putting oneself in the place of God, forming the world anew in the spirit of the myth of a creative artist and overcoming the resistance of matter were already hidden mythologemes of avant-garde. They just surfaced during Stalin’s reign.

Seeing avant-garde and socialist realism as two opposites results from observing them from the wrong angle, the “museum” perspective. What is striking are the differences in the aesthetic solutions of form and the factors that unite avant-garde and socialist realism (such as the critique of decadence, demiurgeology and the opposition of autonomous museum-based art) disappear from sight.



Socialist realism aimed to realise the avant-garde utopia by using the methods of traditional art. A comparison with Christian tradition might be illustrative: avant-garde was an early Christian, ascetic fraction and Stalinism was the established Church that, after it had gained a position of power, began to make use of popular beliefs and pagan traditions by transferring them to a new context and thereby “christianising” them. In Hegelian terms, this meant “an apparent return to the old”. Apparent, because in the case of both Stalinism and the Church, the traditions had been transferred to an eschatological scene, where the difference between the past and the present had lost its meaning.

A post-war Soviet commentator said of avant-garde that it had become an international style, the official art of the world of advertising and Wall Street. Soviet art, by contrast, was truly free and not just pseudo-free as was all art that flourished on the western art market: the artists were able to work together with the state, escape the slavery of having to take into account popular taste and through this, develop a new human being and a new people...

In other words, even after the war it was said more or less outright that the greatest achievement of socialism was aesthetical.

It was only after Stalin that Soviet art developed into its proper, conservative and neo-traditional direction. Imitating the national states of the nineteenth century, artists began to appeal to moralistic and void “eternal values” supposed to be embodied in the people. Solzhenitsyn, for example, fitted into this picture perfectly: according to Groys, he can even be considered the type artist of this time.

However, something of interest can be found even in the time of Hruschevian-Brezhnevian “temperate weather”. Groys takes up the example of Sos-Art of the 1980s which had a similar relationship with socialist realism as pop art had with the imagery of cultural industry. It could not regard its own rulers as faceless phantoms spread around in power relationships and global networks, but inevitably recognised their own alter ego in them. Sos-Art saw its own criminal complicity in what oppressed the rulers: it saw that its own inspiration and the soullessness of power had common roots. And it was from this concubinage that it developed the central object of its reflection.

Sos-Art did not purport to demythologise the art of Stalin’s time, but rather

to remythologise it. It was psychoanalysis of a kind, a way of bringing to light the mythology hidden in it and all the symbolic chains and associations rooted to it. By allowing these elements to co-ordinate and unite freely, it brought out the eclecticism hidden in socialist realism. The petrified Stalin myth could be made to move and, at the same time, its links with other myths and mythemes could be made visible.

If and when the spectator experienced this as liberalisation, it did not happen because of a negation or dismantling of the myth, but rather because the myth was uninhibitedly expanded and accelerated. The simulation of Stalin's project was even more grandiose than its model had ever hoped to be. In other words, this was not just a "parody" of socialist realism. The utopia could not be thrown out at one fell swoop – such a thought would indeed be utopian – but what had to be recognised was its ambivalent moment, included in every artistic project. It was reflected on by means of an "aesthetic psychoanalysis", where the difference between one's own and others or personal and social history was not localised.

Perhaps under the influence of the history elucidated above, the artists of Eastern Europe seem to have detected the pitfalls that are often the fate of efforts at achieving "political art".

Slovenian Laibach is another art group that has dabbled with "aesthetic psychoanalysis". It is a rock group of total art that was founded after the death of Tito and is still together.

The very name Laibach is provocative: it is the German for Ljubljana and already as such, evokes the nation's traumatic history crushed between the Double Monarchy and Nazi Germany. The group has announced that it draws its inspiration – or rather, finds its elements – in "Taylorism, Bruitism, Nazi art and disco".

I have never seen the group perform but judging from the commentators, Laibach's concerts are kind of Wagnerian total works of art that build "the 'noise' of Yugoslavia into a traumatic multimedia spectacle by means of simultaneously repulsive and seductive electronic rhythms".

There is nothing original or "new" in Laibach's art. The group makes it a point not to lean on the concept of originality. From an aesthetical point of view, the result is more like a combination of the ready-made and citations. In its early lyrics, music and stage shows, Laibach introduced a bewildering



mixture of fascist, socialist and nationalist iconography: swastikas, imitations of the Nazi leaders, organising the concerts in a way reminiscent of political mass events, etc. The same motives were seen in the group's provocative posters – they were the ones that caught the audience's attention most directly.

In the 1980s, Laibach's performances were openly nationalistic and proclaimed the superiority of Slovenia. At the same time, however, Slovenian nationalists declared that the group was their enemy. On the other hand, the media that declared the group as fascist in the 80s, barricaded itself behind nationalist slogans less than ten years later...

Why? All the nationalist symbols appeared in Laibach's show side by side with avant-gardist, pop-art and supranational signs. The group sang in German (though none of its members speaks the language). Laibach brought out the multi-element, conflicting nature of the imagery and fantasy world of both Slovenian and other nationalisms. Conservative Slovenians interpreted this as German neo-Nazism, whereas in Germany, neo-rightists and liberals were equally bewildered to hear "an ethnic other" openly perform their archetype (counter)fantasies.

When Laibach, performing in Germany and Austria, declared the national superiority of Slovenia in relation to Germany (the Germans were merely lower class Slovenians), it both reproduced neo-Nazism performatively and turned it upside down – the neo-Nazis of Austria, for example, are of the opinion that Slovenia should be assimilated into their state. In addition, Nazis "traditionally" hate the kind of complex, modernist and atonally dissonant touch that the group employs.

In fact every outfit that the group has worn – with no apparent "criticism" or distancing in mind – has met with a negative reaction from the very object that they have imitated performatively. (I am reminded of the Finnish rock group Eppu Normaali's old song "We don't want bad language in Finland": "To Pioneers I'm a Fascist and to Fascists a Pioneer...")

The state could not avoid reacting to Laibach one way or the other, but whatever it did, something fundamental about "the nature of power" came out. To begin with, judging from the measures of censorship, the group's doings have hit some traumatic nerve. On the other hand, every time the state presents the group as a dangerous threat it reveals its own threatening



and dangerous nature.

Laibach's central starting point or motto is: "All art is subject to political manipulation, except for that which speaks the language of this same manipulation". Its basic method can be considered the confrontation of "power" by its own repressed codes. In other words, it is a kind of homeopathic principle (that Joseph Beuys and Jean Baudrillard had mentioned earlier, in different ways): "Simula simulabus curantor".

Laibach's strategy has also been characterised as "exorcist". Their demonic, militarist and "negative" performance plays with the spectral elements that haunt the background of the prevailing political systems.

According to Slavoj Žižek, the prevailing ideology consists of two levels: first of all, its public, explicit values and secondly, its hidden reverse side which power leans on but which must remain invisible in order to perform its duty (cf., prisons or armies and their unofficial culture, the Southern States and the Ku Klux Klan...). Laibach's "psychoanalytical" aspect is based on bringing out this hidden reverse side, the obscene reverse side of power or its Superego support. In Žižek's words, Laibach is "more X than X itself" when it mediates to power "its own message in a reverse mode".

This is not meant as an immanent criticism that appeals to the proper but insufficiently realised ideals of power. There is no "critical distance" taken to power. In fact, the critical distance itself is the prevailing ideology: "power" distances itself from noble goals and justifies itself in a pragmatic and realistic way, but yet allows criticism as long as it has many voices and is random ("we are not totalitarian, after all"). This is the letters-to-the-editor principle: you can see how discontented and contradictory people always are, no matter what we do!

The citizens, again, take a critical distance to power and their own activities, but ultimately, this only gives them an excuse to participate in the reproduction of the prevalent situation ("I do this, but my heart's not in it...").

In Laibach, by contrast, we are dealing with over-identification with power rather than taking a distance to it – the strategy of the good soldier Svejk, that is! The group takes (let us say) the ideology of the state more seriously than the state itself would be prepared to do and takes it to the very end.



Laibach is “more total than totalitarianism”. It presents the way power works as it is and acts, not in the sense of representation, but of performative. The group takes experientially, and in that sense, phenomenologically, all the way what totalitarian or neo-nationalist devotion to the state and to mass ecstasy means, without contenting itself with pseudo-critical humour, irony, laughter, satire or parody (which of these five it is probably closest to). And this is traumatic, to both “power” and the audience.

Laibach’s performances pull down ideology in two parts: firstly, they remove the ideological elements from their original context and bring them out in their idiotic material presence, as it were. Secondly, they recontextualise these elements into some kind of an “ideology in general”, where the usual mechanisms of, let us say, the seduction of nationalism become visible, and experienced. Exactly when nations are determining their mutual differences, they use symbolism and rhetoric. Consequently, the motives of different nationalisms and the juxtaposition of the signs that support them brings to light their “universality” or common features.

“Totalitarian” symbols were and are recognisable and stir our emotions. They stimulate identification and “ecstasy” even in those who do not share their political content. In other words, this is not preaching to those who have already seen the light but a performance where even the “progressive” participant is forced to inquire into his or her own relationship with power and ideology.

Finally, Russian avant-garde was “the last”, technological form of art religion or so-called great art in very much the same way as the technological age is the last opening of Platonic, aesthetic-productive metaphysics.

In its concrete form, avant-garde had two fundamental “methodological” principles, which stemmed from romanticism. Firstly, and simply, one has to bring to light one’s own working method: when presenting the work itself one also has to show “what it does” and how. (The modern “real-TV” instead of the classic “candid camera”...) Secondly, it reads the sequence of artistic movements so that the next “stage” always brings to light the constitutive problem – the repressed core – of its predecessor.

These guiding principles are still valid, but now we are in a situation where they have to be applied to avant-garde itself. It is this “meta-avant-garde” that both Sos-Art and Laibach can be said to represent. At the same time, it



thematizes the common root of art and politics – the fact that from Plato through German Romanticism to Wagner and Heidegger, the destiny of art and politics has always been “decided” together.

Who decides on this destiny is a philosopher. The eternal debate is then about who is a philosopher.

## Literature

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## Footnotes

1. Jaakko Hintikka (1982) has compared phenomenology to cubism. But Malevich might be another and perhaps even more apt comparison - as different as he and Husserl are in their profile as thinkers. Although Husserl did not talk about the unconscious, even his starting point (at his later stage, quite explicitly) was the crisis of occidental sciences sunk in their own objectivisation and technicalisation. Even his suggestion for a remedy was analogous: the reconnection of knowledge with experience or the world of living by means of reduction. Though Husserl's philosophy, of course, lacks the poetic dimension essential to the artist Malevich, even the Russian was not talking about the artist's creative tyranny. In both phenomenology and suprematism, the foundations of the world are reconstructed in accordance with a buried origin.

2. In Latin,  *fingere*  (which also gives us  *ficta* , i.e., fiction) means modification, modifying, modelling, sculpturing (in Greek  *plaittein/plassein* , cft. "plastic"). These expressions have always had their nuance of mimesis, as well. (See Lacoue-Labarthe 1990.)